

Thank You, M'am by Langston Hughes

BEFORE YOU READ

Do you know someone “larger than life”? In “Thank You, M'am,” a young boy meets a person who fits that description. Read the story to learn how the boy’s outlook on life changes after spending just a few hours in the company of Mrs. Jones.

LITERARY FOCUS: DIALOGUE

- In “Thank You, M'am,” two characters, an older woman and a boy, meet in an unusual way. The characters reveal themselves to each other and to the reader through **dialogue**, or conversation. As you read, notice what these characters say to each other—and what they don’t say.
- As you read, look for other details that bring the characters to life. For example, what do the characters’ actions and appearances tell you about them? What does the setting tell you about one of the characters?

READING SKILLS: MAKING INFERENCES

An **inference** is an educated guess—a guess based on good evidence. When you make an inference, you use details in the text and your own experience to guess about something you don’t know for sure.

For example, the writer may say, “When the teacher, Mr. Green, called on the new girl, she smiled.” The writer doesn’t tell you directly that the new girl is pleased. Based on your own experience, however, you can *infer* that she is pleased to be called on.

To make an inference:

- Look for details in the text.
- Relate the details to what you know about life.
- Make a careful guess.

Make inferences as you read “Thank You, M'am.” Look for clues that reveal important information about the characters. Then, read on to see how the characters develop. You might use a chart like this to record your inferences.

Details from Story	My Inferences About Characters



Reading Standard 1.1

Identify and use the literal and figurative meanings of words and understand word derivations.

Reading Standard 3.4

Determine characters’ traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, and soliloquy.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

You may be unfamiliar with the following words from "Thank You, M'am." Preview these words before you begin reading.

release (ri-lēs') *v.*: set free; let go.

*The woman held him and would not **release** him until he promised not to run away.*

frail (frāl) *adj.*: weak; easily broken.

*Although the old woman appeared **frail**, she was actually very strong.*

presentable (prē-zent'ə-bəl) *adj.*: acceptable; suitable.

*Combing his hair would make the boy look **presentable**.*

barren (bar'ən) *adj.*: bare; empty.

*Because no children were playing on it, the stoop looked **barren**.*

SYNONYMS

A **synonym** is a word that has the same or almost the same meaning as another word. Although synonyms sometimes share an exact meaning, often they have different shades of meaning. When writers are dissatisfied with a word, they may replace it with a synonym that expresses the meaning more exactly. When writers feel they have repeated a word too often, they may replace one of its uses with a synonym.

Synonyms/Shades of Meaning	
Original sentence	Synonyms for surprised
The boy was surprised by the attention.	shocked , "extremely surprised" amazed , "filled with wonder" astounded , "bewildered with sudden surprise" dumbfounded , "speechless with amazement" overwhelmed , "overcome with emotion"

Replace *surprised* with each of the synonyms to see how the meaning and impact of the original sentence change.

The boy was _____ by the attention.

Thank You, M'am

Langston Hughes



CHARACTER

What does the boy do in lines 1–12? Underline the details that tell you. Then, circle the sentences that tell you how the woman reacts.

10

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the sudden single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance. Instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

"Thank You, M'am" from *Short Stories* by Langston Hughes. Copyright © 1996 by Ramona Bass and Arnold Rampersad. Reprinted by permission of Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him tightly. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

20 The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"Lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

30 "Um-hum! Your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

40 The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being-dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering *you* when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with *me*," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you

WORD STUDY

In lines 18–32, the boy answers the woman's questions with "Yes'm" and "No'm." The term *m'am* is a contraction for "madam," a polite way of addressing a woman.

CHARACTER

In lines 18–32, the woman speaks roughly to the boy. Circle what the boy says in response. What do these lines of **dialogue**, or conversation, suggest about the boy's feelings?

CHARACTER

Underline the words in lines 38–40 that tell you what the woman plans to do. What do these words reveal, or show, about her?

WORD STUDY

In lines 50–59, we see Mrs. Jones *drag* Roger up the street. *Drag* and *pull* are synonyms, or words with similar meanings. If the writer had used *pull* instead of *drag*, would Mrs. Jones have seemed as bold? Explain.

IDENTIFY

In lines 62–65, Roger faces an **internal conflict**—he must make a difficult decision. Underline the words that show his two choices. What is his final decision?

INFER

What can you **infer**, or guess, about Roger from what he says about himself in line 74?

CHARACTER

Circle the words in line 77 that show the boy's **motivation**, or reason, for trying to steal the pocketbook. Underline Mrs. Jones's response to his reason.

got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.”

50 Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

60 She said, “What is your name?”

“Roger,” answered the boy.

“Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face,” said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose—at last. Roger looked at the door—looked at the woman—looked at the door—*and went to the sink*.

“Let the water run until it gets warm,” she said. “Here's a clean towel.”

“You gonna take me to jail?” asked the boy, bending over the sink.

70 “Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere,” said the woman. “Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat, and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?”

“There's nobody home at my house,” said the boy.

“Then we'll eat,” said the woman. “I believe you're hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook.”

“I want a pair of blue suede shoes,” said the boy.

“Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes,” said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.

80 “You could've asked me.”



“M’am?”

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do, dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the daybed. After a while she said, “I were young once and I wanted things I could not get.”

90 There was another long pause. The boy’s mouth opened. Then he frowned, not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, “Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but*, didn’t you? You thought I was going to say, *but I didn’t snatch people’s pocketbooks*. Well, I wasn’t going to say that.” Pause. Silence. “I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if He didn’t already know. Everybody’s got something in common. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable.”

INFER

In line 81 Roger says “M’am?” because he is surprised at Mrs. Jones’s response. What might he have expected her to say?

CHARACTER

Re-read the sentence in lines 88–89. What does it tell you about Mrs. Jones?

CHARACTER

Pause at line 99. Mrs. Jones avoids saying, “but I didn’t snatch people’s pocketbooks.” Why doesn’t she say this?

CHARACTER

Read the description of Mrs. Jones's home (lines 100–108). What do you learn about her from where she lives?

CHARACTER

Through her **actions** in lines 100–108, Mrs. Jones shows Roger (and the reader) that she trusts him. Underline the details that tell what she does.

FLUENCY

You can learn a lot about the characters' **motivations** from their actions. Read aloud the boxed passage to make each character's motives clear.

100

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse, which she left behind her on the daybed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room, away from the purse, where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

110 “Do you need somebody to go the store,” asked the boy, “maybe to get some milk or something?”

“Don’t believe I do,” said the woman, “unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here.”

“That will be fine,” said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that



would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, red-heads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

“Eat some more, son,” she said.

When they were finished eating, she got up and said, “Now here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor nobody else’s*—because shoes got by devilish ways will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But from here on in, son, I hope you will behave yourself.”

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. “Good night! Behave yourself, boy!” she said, looking out into the street as he went down the steps.

The boy wanted to say something other than “Thank you, m’am” to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn’t even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked up at the large woman in the door. Then she shut the door.



INFER

Pause at line 121. Why doesn’t Mrs. Jones ask Roger personal questions?

CHARACTER

Pause at line 128. When Mrs. Jones gives Roger the money, she is trying to teach him something. What do you think she wants him to learn?

INFER

At the end of the story, why is it difficult for the boy to thank Mrs. Jones?
